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ABSTRACT

Cultural differences, including the personal cultures of learners and educators and the culture of the larger social-political environment, are relevant to adult learning. Culture includes those values, beliefs, and practices shared by a group of people. Cultures tend to vary along a number of dimensions, and the following dimensions are among those in which different views and behaviors can lead to misunderstanding and tension: (1) individualism and collectivism; (2) monochronic and polychronic time; (3) egalitarianism versus hierarchy; (4) action versus "being" orientation; and (5) change and tradition. In addition, certain variables, such as communication styles and power imbalances, tend to cut across differences in values. In order to select appropriate instructional approaches, adult education teachers need to realize that cultural dimensions provide the basis for learners' behavior and responses, and because teachers are cultural beings, teachers' teaching methods are always based on cultural values, regardless of whether teachers are aware of their influence. For example, teachers in the United States tend to value individual projects and methods and activities that culminate in products. By being culturally sensitive, teachers can foster learning approaches that have the potential to do the following: (1) foster the social construction of knowledge by using methods such as collaborative group learning; (2) provide structured guidance through learning experiences for learners from cultures where hierarchy and expertise of the teacher are highly valued; (3) help students from disempowered groups by permitting alternative assessment, such as portfolio building; and (4) provide computer-assisted learning to students who need privacy so they can prepare away from real-time compressed communication. Adult educators can become more sensitive to cultural differences by first examining the cultural

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values that underlie their preferred methods of teaching and then diversifying their teaching methods. (Contains 15 references.) (KC)

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Considering Culture in the Selection of Teaching Approaches for Adults

by Linda Ziegahn

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Adult educators are increasingly committed to designing learning that takes into account cultural differences. We are discovering that "valuing" diversity is not enough to enable educators from the dominant culture, particularly European Americans living in the United States, to recognize difference and know how to change instruction so that learners who have felt marginalized feel visible and valued. This ***Digest*** examines the different dimensions of culture that are relevant to the adult learning context, speaking primarily to the case of the United States, including both the personal cultures of learners and educators, and the culture of the larger social political environment. It explores how cultural values permeate instruction and looks at several approaches that take culture into account.

What Is Culture, Anyway?

The simplest definition of culture includes those values, beliefs, and practices shared by a group of people. Social scientists and anthropologists vary on their definitions of what comprises a culture, subculture, or microculture, but for practical purposes, the notion of sharing a common worldview is often enough for individuals who find themselves moving between multiple cultures. Culture can be subtle, and what is considered cultural can evolve over time. For example, gender, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and age might not have been considered dimensions of culture 25 years ago. But today we study gender communication differences, the influence of religious views on decisions and behaviors, and the assumptions that can or cannot be made depending upon a person's physical ability, sexual orientation, or age. Educators need to be mindful that they cannot assume they know the cultural background of their students; even the seemingly homogenous classroom necessitates an expectation and active exploration of multiculturalism. Culture is an attribute of individuals, of small groups, of organizations, and of nations; a single person can belong to a multiplicity of cultures, any one of which may be important at any given time (Brislin 1993). For example, the most salient dimension of culture for a 50-year-old woman named Emma enrolled in a course to learn a new software program may be age, as she observes the ease with which her 22-year-old classmates negotiate the intricacies of the program. When Emma participates in a racial dialogue experience, she is very aware that her ethnic/racial identity as a European American is preeminent. And if Emma were Deaf, considering a graduate degree, it would be critical for her to find a program that actively facilitated her use of American Sign Language interpreters. Instruction in any one of these situations would be more relevant to Emma if her instructors were aware of how specific aspects of culture, such as age, ethnicity and race, or deafness, suggested different teaching methods (Heimlich and Norland 1994).

Key Areas of Cultural Difference

Cultures tend to vary along a number of dimensions. The following are among those in which different views and behaviors can lead to misunderstanding and tension:

- **Individualism and Collectivism**. Individualistic cultures generally value the self-reliance, equality, and autonomy of the individual, whereas collectivist cultures tend to value group effort and harmony and knowing one's place within society. For example, mainstream U.S. workplace cultures are often fragmented over the balance between rewarding individual effort and competition versus recognizing and fostering teamwork and cooperation.
- **Monochronic and Polychronic Time**. "M-time" is tangible and can be "saved, spent, wasted, lost, made up...and run out" (Hall 1983, p. 43). Personal interaction can be sacrificed to scheduling and efficiency. "P-time," however, stresses involvement of people and completion of transactions rather than preset schedules.
- **Egalitarianism versus Hierarchy**. Believing in fairness and equal opportunities for everyone is critical in more individualistic cultures that often equate hierarchy with rigidity, even if equality is more of a societal ideal than a reality. Conversely, hierarchy may be valued in more collectivist cultures as a means of acknowledging innate differences and inequalities and of facilitating communication through the recognition of various social levels through titles and roles.
- **Action versus "Being" Orientation**. U.S. culture generally tends to value action, efficiency, getting to "the bottom line," often downplaying social interactions in the interests of achieving goals. Taking time to discuss and understand complex issues and to appreciate the moment may be more important to people coming from a more holistic cultural orientation than the perception of precipitously moving to action steps.
- **Change and Tradition**. "Change" has become the mantra of dominant U.S. society, which looks toward the future and resists an historical perspective. Those coming from cultures that value the lessons of history view the past as an important guide to the present and the future.

Certain variables cut across differences in values. Communication style is the expression of various cultural values; power differences stem from the historic position of particular cultures within sociopolitical systems.

- **Communication Styles**. *How* we communicate is often as important as what we communicate. Depending partially on cultural variables such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, and race (among others), individuals may have a preference for both sending and receiving messages in styles that are linear or circular, direct or indirect, attached or detached, procedural or personal, and more confrontational in either intellectual or relational terms.
- **Power Imbalances**. In addition to the differences in values and communication styles that contribute to cultural diversity, cultures are stratified by inequities in terms of access to political and economic power. Thus, a culture's relative advantage or disadvantage depends on its position vis-à-vis other cultural groups.

Why Instructional Approaches Are Not Neutral

Preparatory to the selection of teaching strategies is a recognition that (1) the cultural dimensions described here provide the basis for learners' behavior and responses, and (2) as cultural beings, our teaching is always based on cultural values, regardless of our awareness of their influence (Heimlich and Norland 1994). For example, more individualistic cultures, such as those found in North America, tend to reward teachers and learners for class activities that stress individual initiative and expression, whereas more collectivist cultures tend to value those collectivist efforts which reinforce social connections and norms. For U.S. adult education, this means that the "default" teaching methods might include an individual learner's presentation of a project in front of the class or leadership in large-group discussion. Although these activities are valued in a culture that promotes individual assertion and initiative, they may be perplexing for a learner coming from a culture where the question of

who speaks from a position of leadership or power is highly dependent upon age, gender, or status as a student. For example, Chinese adult students may find the learner's role to be highly dependent upon their lower status in the classroom, where questioning a teacher would be viewed as questioning competence (Pratt et al. 1998). Similarly, in Blackfeet communication, elders are viewed as those best equipped for public speaking because they are most socially interconnected. Speaking publicly, especially for younger adults, risks severing communal relations (Carbaugh 1998).

Methods and activities that culminate in products, a consequence of the value placed on action and results, also appear regularly in U.S. adult education. Learners coming from environments where time is dedicated more to the exploration of ideas rather than a goal, however, may not feel the need to come to closure on learning, especially if such "timely" termination preempts lively learning processes. Hispanic learners, for example, may learn better with nonformal education approaches linked to community life (Jeria 1999), rather than methods embedded in the more rigid temporal dimensions associated with U.S. public schools.

It is important to recognize that, although some concepts of adult education taught in the United States seem at first glance to reify core national values, there may be considerable leeway in how methods associated with these concepts emerge. As an example, self-directed learning is generally described as a process in which people take primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). On the surface, such a construct appears thoroughly grounded in individualist cultural values like individual initiative and agency. However, recent theorists elaborating on self-direction have suggested greater roles for mentors and coaches (Grow 1994) and a recognition that autonomy in learning does not preclude a valuing of interdependence, depending on the learning context (Nah 2000). A method born of one culture may be adaptable to another when relevant cultural differences are considered.

Approaches that Allow Alternative Voices

How can teachers help learners appreciate the diversity inherent in any classroom? Following are a few examples of culturally sensitive learning approaches that have the potential to foster inclusion.

The social construction of knowledge might be fostered through collaborative group learning, which emphasizes the process of listening to and respecting others, understanding alternative views, challenging and questioning others, negotiating ideas, and caring for group participants (Imel and Tisdell 1996). The communicative focus and socially constructed nature of collaborative learning are illustrated through the experiences of African American students, as one example, where self-expression, connection with the instructor, and the need to equalize the learning environment are all valued (Hecht et al.1993; Imel and Tisdell 1996; Sheared 1999).

Teachers may want to provide structured guidance through learning experiences, a strategy that may be particularly useful for learners from cultures where hierarchy and expertise of the teacher are highly valued. Mentorships may serve as a bridge for culturally different students seeking comfort with dominant-culture teaching methods, especially if the teaching-learning interactions take place outside of class (Carbaugh 1998; Liang and McQueen 2000; Pratt et al. 1998).

The learning of disempowered groups may be better served through an assessment vehicle that allows their concrete stories and cosmologies to be related. Portfolios, collections of extended essays and documentation that describe learning in relation to college-level criteria (Michelson 1997), allow an alternative to learning assessed solely through abstract principles.

Students from other cultures may appreciate computer-assisted learning media, which allow them to share stories around personal and group cultural identities in an environment that may be perceived as more open and relaxed than the face-to-face classroom context (Coombs 1993). The online medium, which serves a variety of different purposes and audiences, is also helpful to non-English speakers seeking privacy and time to prepare away from real-time compressed communication (Liang and McQueen 2000).

Although there are some general categories of difference between cultures, there are many ways that instruction can be designed or redesigned to become more culturally sensitive. Adult educators can start to become more sensitive to cultural difference in the classroom by first examining the cultural values that underlie their preferred methods of teaching. Diversifying teaching methods should be a dynamic, interactive process with learners that enriches all of adult learning.

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